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Kate CROSBY and Janaka ASHIN

## **All Too Human: The Impact of International Buddhist Networks on the Life and Posthumous Conviction of the Burmese Nationalist Monk, Shin Ukkatṭha (1897-1978)**

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines how the Buddhist, interfaith and nationalist networks centred on India in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century influenced the Burmese monk Shin Ukkatṭha. On his return to Burma in 1929, after seven years' travel, study and debate in India, Shin Ukkatṭha expressed his Buddhist nationalism by opening a Buddhist Mission school to combine Buddhist and secular learning and by publishing Buddhist tracts and works, including a best-selling work on comparative religion. He won an important Christian-Buddhist debate in 1936 which, widely reported in the national press, inspired many to convert back to Buddhism. Part of his success was due to his relativistic attitudes to texts. He was willing to dismiss as later fabrication parts of the Buddhist canon if they ran counter to current scientific thinking. Like other Buddhists influenced by Theosophy, he dismissed traditional cosmology and reinterpreted rebirth in line with Darwinian evolutionary theory. His stance ran counter to the Buddhist Sangha hierarchy, which regarded an anti-secular, fundamentalist as the best defence against the corruptions of colonialism. Under the British, the lack of a central Buddhist authority gave Shin Ukkatṭha the freedom to express his views. However, after Independence, he increasingly found himself at odds with the Sangha hierarchy, which he roundly insulted as naïve when he walked out on the Sixth Council citing its uncritical approach to the canonical texts as his reason. So significant was his challenge to authority, that in 1981 the State Sangha Leaders Committee set up under General Ne Win to try miscreant monks, selected Shin Ukkatṭha as the second case. The court found him guilty of heresy – posthumously, for Shin Ukkatṭha had died three years earlier.

**KEYWORDS:** Burmese Buddhism; Shin Ukkatṭha; Vinicchaya; theosophy; Darwinianism; Christian-Buddhist debate

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## *Introduction*

Brian Bocking's contribution to Buddhist Studies has been wide-reaching, from Madhyamaka philosophy to Japanese religion, culminating with the opening up of an entire area: early modern international Buddhist networks. This work, conducted since Brian ceased to be our colleague at SOAS and took up the first professorship in the Study of Religions in Ireland, at University College Cork, has mined a rich vein of findings, revealing a previously unrecognised wealth of exchange and interactions between Buddhists in Asia and interested parties globally. Brian's own research within this field has been on two participants in those networks, Charles Pfoundes (1840-1907) and his younger contemporary U Dhammaloka (1856-1913?). Both highly skilled, multifaceted and colourful characters – not unlike the dedicatee of this volume – but also troublemakers who deliberately challenged the status quo and chose to rankle the authorities that be – and here you must judge for yourselves whether or not further parallels might be drawn. In this paper, we want to focus on one of the next generation of participants in those networks, the Burmese monk Shin Ukkattha (Okkata), born in 1897. A polymath and also – by all accounts – a troublemaker, Shin Ukkattha does not yet feature in accounts of global Buddhism, yet he actively engaged in the debates within the international networks centred on India in the early 20th century that contributed to the formation of nationalist, revivalist and global Buddhism. This engagement led him to become, for rather unexpected reasons, one of the most famous monks in Burma.

A staunch defender of Buddhism and a nationalist while in India, those who met Shin Ukkattha there might have come away with the impression that he was a pillar of Burmese orthodoxy: for example, in c.1924 he won a debate defending the compatibility of meat-eating and compassion within Theravada Buddhism against criticism from Hindus (Mya Din 1984?: 77). However, the ideas he encountered and even at the time rejected resonated with and influenced his revisionist interests. He brought these ideas, including the adoption of vegetarianism, with him when he returned home after a seven-year sojourn in India. His practice at winning debates and contests in the name of Buddhism in India in the 1920s stood him in good stead after his return to Burma. In 1936, his defeat of Christians in a debate was reported in the Thuriya ('Sun'), a national newspaper, for several days in succession (Thuriya Newspaper on 1, 7 and 22 May 1936).

In the 1930s he set up a successful school in Taungdwingyi, central Burma that provided education for the Burmese rural poor, and this school is reported to have acted as a base for regional nationalist and

communist movements in the 30s and early 40s (Shin Ukkatṭha 1961: 11). While many monks in Burma resisted secular education and the involvement of monks in its provision, as documented by Alicia Turner (2014), Shin Ukkatṭha combined secular and Buddhist topics at his school, eventually winning government recognition. The school was closed during the Japanese occupation: Shin Ukkatṭha's persistent autonomy, a characteristic recognisable throughout his life, led in 1942 to his arrest in quick succession by both the retreating British and the advancing Japanese colonial armies. Once his fellow monk and mentor Shin Ādiccavaṃsa (1881-1950) had negotiated his release, rather than collaborate with the Japanese, he closed his school and withdrew to a 'forest' temple in the same township. In spite of the eventfulness of his life and the importance of his contributions to Burmese Buddhism and nationalism, it is not for these that he gained lasting fame, but for his conviction for heresy in 1981, three years after he had died. In the rest of this paper we shall explore how the discourse on Buddhism that emerged among international networks nearly a century earlier contributed to this conviction.

### *From Rural Burmese Monasticism to the International Buddhist Networks of India*

When he was seven years old Shin Ukkatṭha – this is his later ordained name, but we shall use it for convenience throughout – became a temple boy and commenced the traditional Burmese monastic education that was the main source of acquiring literacy for Burmese boys. Always top of the class, as he progressed he moved from monastery to monastery to find the best education available, as was the practice at the time. Attending a number of the high-profile monastic centres of learning, he excelled in the study of the Pali canon, and in poetry and composition, writing his first work, a novel, when he was just 15. By this time, he had already taken on the role of teacher, but decided to take his education further by studying English and attending university talks in Yangon in 1921. He was now in his early 20s. That same year, the famous nationalist monk, U Ottama (1879-1930), was arrested for his outspoken criticism of the Craddock Scheme, which promised less autonomy for Burma than for India in the proposed changes to colonial rule.

U Ottama's own rise to prominence in the nationalist movement had begun during his decade of travel throughout Asia, returning to Burma in 1911. In addition to studying, he engaged in anticolonial activism with fellow campaigners in India, and was regarded by many as being both Buddhist and Hindu. U Ottama's travels had begun in Calcutta, India and concluded in a teaching post in Japan and travels in East Asia (Schober 2011: 104). He associated colonial oppression with the

decline of Buddhism: the Buddha had only been able to preach about Nibbāna to the people of northern India because they were free; since the Burmese were not then free, its monks had a duty to protest against the British, to make possible the resumption of teaching about Nibbāna (Smith 1965: 96).

As Juliane Schober points out, U Ottama inspired a younger generation of nationalist monks (Schober, 2011: 105). While we have not found a direct connection between U Ottama and Shin Ukkatṭha, it is possible that Ottama's fame and oration at the time of Shin Ukkatṭha's search for English language instruction in Yangon was influential in the latter's decision to follow in Ottama's footsteps by boarding a boat to India in 1922, the year after U Ottama's arrest. With the support of two Burmese sponsors, Shin Ukkatṭha would spend seven years there, travelling, studying, debating and engaging in nationalist and pro-Buddhist discourse.

On his arrival in India, Shin Ukkatṭha stayed at the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta which stood next to the Calcutta branch of the Theosophical Society. These two institutions were enormously influential in moulding the shape of modern, global Buddhism and played key roles in India during this period. Buddhism in India was gaining prominence internationally, not only as the location of Buddhism's origins but as a potential Buddhist Holy Land that could form the centre of a network of Buddhists from across Asia. Buddhism was also of increasing interest among Indian intellectuals as a source for an Asian route to modernity (Ober 2013). We shall return to the influence of theosophical thought on emerging global Buddhism below. In practical terms its members also contributed financially to the Mahabodhi Society, which had been set up by Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), with his vision of India as a Buddhist Holy Land, to reclaim Buddhist sites, particularly Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, from Hindu to international Buddhist custodianship, a goal achieved in 1953, not long after India's Independence. Shin Ukkatṭha took up this cause. During his time in India one of the important topics of debate in the pursuit of a change in the custodianship of Bodh Gaya was Buddhism's separate identity from Hinduism. At the end of his seven years in India, immediately prior to his departure, Shin Ukkatṭha would lecture on this topic at the Mahabodhi Society. Unlike U Ottama, Shin Ukkatṭha was adamant that Hinduism and Buddhism were entirely separate entities.

The year that Shin Ukkatṭha's arrived in Calcutta also saw the death of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Kazi Dawa-Samdup (1868-1922), who had only recently taken up a lectureship at the university of Calcutta. Dawa-Samdup's appointment gives us some indication of the influence of theosophy on Buddhist thought in India at this time and on the emerging international Buddhist network that centred on India. Dawa-Samdup is

probably best known as the co-author or ‘guru’ of the theosophist Walter Evans-Wentz (1878-1965), in the publication of one of the most internationally famous Buddhist books, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This work is a modified translation of a funerary text that provides guidance for the deceased through the intermediate realm after death. Although it was not published until 1927, Wentz commenced the translation with Dawa-Samdup in 1919, after meeting him in Darjeeling. Dawa-Samdup had previously worked with other influential theosophist writers on Buddhism, such as Alexandra David-Neel. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is well-known among scholars for the liberties it takes with the original text, giving it a theosophical slant.

One such liberty is its dismissal of traditional Buddhist cosmology as “irrational” (Evans-Wentz 1927: 42, cited Lopez 1998: 69) – the heavens and hells must not be understood as real but merely as referring to psychological states. Another liberty was the related reinterpretation of the doctrine of *samsāra*, the cycle of repeated death and rebirth in which all unenlightened beings are trapped. This doctrine was not rejected outright, but reinterpreted under the influence of Darwinian theories of evolution. Since humans are the highest form of evolution, they cannot be reborn as something lower, such as an animal. This reinterpretation of *samsāra* had its roots in the early days of theosophy’s engagement in Buddhism: it had informed the Buddhist Catechism written by co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Colonel Olcott (1832-1907), and published in 1881 (Lopez 1998: 69). As we shall see, this reinterpretation would have significant bearing on how Shin Ukkatṭha came to revise his own understanding of Buddhism.

### *Satan of the Bible: Shin Ukkatṭha and Buddhist-Christian Debate*

We shall return below to the influence of this particular reinterpretation on Shin Ukkatṭha’s posthumous trial. First we want to demonstrate the direct influence of the themes current among the emerging global Buddhist networks to which he was exposed during his time in India on two significant events in his life in the period following his return to Burma. The first is the debate in 1936 between Christians and Buddhists alluded to above. It took place in a village called Kyaukkwin in Pyi District, belonging to the Chin ethnic group, many of whom had converted to Christianity. The headman of Kyaukkwin village was Buddhist, while his wife, like most other villagers, was Christian. Since supporting both religions was expensive for them, becoming a source of tension, the headman and his wife agreed to host a debate as to which religion was better. Success was to be judged in terms of the number of

converts each religion won as a result of the debate (Thakhin Myat Saing 1962: 28-31).

During his time in India, Shin Ukkatṭha had engaged in debates with several religions. For his challenge to Christians in Amritsar he had gained the nickname 'Satan of the Bible' which so delighted him that he incorporated it into one of the pen names, "S.B Ukkatṭha," under which he published some tracts on religion and nationalism of the type popular in 1930s Burma (Mya Din 1984?: 96-99). In the 1930s Shin Ukkatṭha was also using what he had learnt about religions other than Buddhism while in India to write a book called *Kappapyassanā* ('Questions about the World'), which explores a number of religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Taoism, by answering a series of 45 questions, such as "what qualities make a religion authentic?" (Ukkatṭha 1940, reprint 1964: 98). The book, which is still recognised in Burma as an authoritative source on world religions, was completed in 1939, and published a year later.

With his experience of debating in India and his interest in comparing religions, Shin Ukkatṭha was invited to represent Buddhism at the debate in Kyaukkwin village. The most famous anti-Christian Buddhist writer at the time was U Ñeyya who had recently published a famous anti-Christian book, the *Lawka Myet Hman* (c.1934). Anticipating that he would be the main speaker on the Buddhist side, the Christian speakers had studied this book and prepared their line of argument as a response to the arguments in it (Myat Saing 1962: 148-149). U Ñeyya, however, declined to attend – people suspected that he was afraid of losing. Thrown by his absence, the Christians nevertheless proceeded with delivering their rehearsed speeches, even though, without U Ñeyya as an opponent, they no longer fitted the occasion. Their displeasure at his absence was reported by the *Thuriya* newspaper in one of the several articles it published on the debate and its consequences (22 May 1936).

U Ñeyya was a very conservative monk, as can be seen from the unreserved attack he had made the preceding year on Ashin Ādiccabhivaṃsa, who had become Shin Ukkatṭha's close friend in India where they had spent four years together. Ashin Ādiccabhivaṃsa was an outspoken polemicist, who openly claimed that, although he was a Buddhist nationalist, he would give up Buddhism if he found a higher truth (Ādiccabhivaṃsa 1935: 26). He made this statement in a book called *Bhikkunīsāsanopadesa* which he published in 1935, the year before the Kyaukkwin debate, arguing for the revival of the full ordination lineage for Theravada nuns (*bhikkhunī*). Those familiar with Burmese Sangha politics will know that the Sangha hierarchy in Burma remains vehemently opposed to the ordination of women: in 2005 the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee, the highest monastic authority in Burma, ordered the arrest and prosecuted a Burmese woman who had received

bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka when she returned home to tend to her dying father (Crosby 2014: 229). This opposition to female ordination was already current among the Sangha hierarchy prior to Independence and U Ñeyya successfully led a formal denunciation, or shaming, of Ashin Ādiccabhivaṃsa, a procedure called a pakāsaniyakamma, in response to his promotion of the nuns' cause. It may therefore have been particularly satisfying to Shin Ukkatṭha to show courage where U Ñeyya had lost his nerve. As we shall see, it is also probable that the relativistic stance of Shin Ukkatṭha, a reformer like Ādiccabhivaṃsa, was a factor in the Buddhists winning the debate on this occasion.

The first speaker on the morning of the debate was U Tha Din, a Christian religious teacher in Mandalay. A former monk, he explained that he had converted from Buddhism to Christianity because of the illogical stories he found in the Pali canon, the sacred texts of Theravada Buddhism. In support of this statement, he specified a number of stories from texts such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*, 'the chronology of the Buddhas,' a book of the Pali canon recognised by scholars as relatively late. One story was a detail in the account of the birth of Siddhattha, the future Buddha: four large golden pots appeared when he was born. The problem for U Tha Din was that the pots, measuring several miles in diameter, would have destroyed the city were it true. Another story he recalled was that Sakka, the king of the gods, transformed himself into a rat in order to get into the underwear of a nun. He did this to protect the Buddha from the false accusation of the nun Ciñcamāṇa, who claimed the Buddha had had sex with her. Sakka, as rat, gnawed through the rope used to tie a fake bump to her belly in order to make her look pregnant, and thus exposed her deceit. How could a god do such an impure thing? Rather than address the details of these stories, Shin Ukkatṭha simply dismissed the *Buddhavaṃsa* as later literature, written by Sinhalese *literati*, and not an original part of the canon, and expressed his amazement that the speaker and other former monks present did not know how to distinguish between the genuine teachings of the Buddha and later fabrications (Myat Saing 1962: 154-157).

Shin Ukkatṭha went on to suggest that if these speakers did not know the genuine teachings of the Buddha from the false ones, perhaps they did not know the genuine teachings of Christianity either. And he began to undermine their - or at least the audience's - confidence in their knowledge of the Bible by referring to different English translations and editions of the Bible from Tyndale onwards. He then turned to differences between accounts of God in the Bible and stories of the Buddha in Buddhist texts: despite all of the different versions of the texts, no one - he pointed out - can find a story of the Buddha killing living beings, unlike the Biblical God. He then challenged the Christian notion that everything is God's will. If so, then the non-believer in God, the killer, the thief, the



rapist, the liar and the drunkard are also God's wish. The Buddha, said Shin Ukkatṭha, would not will such things: he guided people against evil actions, such as killing and stealing (*ibid.* 159).

Here we find Shin Ukkatṭha proposing that in both traditions some canonical texts are regarded as reliable while others not, but that, when taken as a whole, we can find in them key indicators about the nature of God and the nature of the Buddha which show the Buddha to be superior. He first claimed the need for selective acceptance of canonical texts, then undermined the audience's confidence in the textual knowledge of his opponents. In doing so, he also convinced the audience that he knew Christian texts very well. He conveniently left aside parallel Christian-Buddhist ethical precepts. Shin Ukkatṭha had won over the crowd. The *Thuriya* newspaper reported it as a victory for the Buddhists, and observed that villagers began converting to Buddhism from that day onwards, a few at a time (*Thuriya* newspaper 1, 7 and 22 May 1936). In his brief autobiography, just eighteen pages long, and written in 1961, Shin Ukkatṭha claims that the entire village converted (Ukkatṭha 1961: 13).

Shin Ukkatṭha had almost certainly been influenced by the most famous Christian Buddhist debate in history, the Panadura debate of 1873, which took place in southwest Sri Lanka. An English account of the debate was published in 1878, and it was reading a copy of this in Boston that drew Colonel Olcott to visit Sri Lanka. Thus began the long relationship between theosophists and Buddhists which would lead to the founding of the Mahabodhi Society and such works as Olcott's *A Buddhist Catechism* (1881) and Wentz and Dawa-Sandup's *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927). The winning argument in the Panadura debate had been a challenge to God's omnipotence. Mohottivattē Guṇānanda, the speaker on behalf of Buddhism, cited a passage from the Bible, "though The Lord was with Judah when he drove out the inhabitants of the mountain, yet he could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron." (Judges 1:19). The failure of Judah, in spite of God's help, to overcome iron, which the Sinhalese used to ward off evil spirits, showed that God could not be omnipotent (Peebles 1878/1995: 68–69).

The proficiency of Buddhist monks in these debates had taken the Christians by surprise, since the former had mostly avoided direct confrontation with Christian missionaries until this point. However, over the preceding 70 years, many of the high-ranking monks of Sri Lanka had become involved in a protracted debate within Buddhism concerning the validity of an ordination platform (*sīmā*). The *sīmā* debate, which also drew on Burmese textual expertise, had honed the debating skills of the Sangha hierarchy. After the loss of royal patronage under the colonial government, monks such as Ven. Guṇānanda formed close relationships with a wider range of lay supporters, their ability to preach in an appealing and accessible manner being an important skill in attracting lay

support. Their accessibility also responded to the changing worldviews of the newly emerging elite, whose wealth came from their trading and administrative connections with the colonial authorities. These Buddhist monks, influenced by Western worldviews and contributing to the emergence of modernist Buddhism in Sri Lanka, found points of convergence with western atheists as well as Deist and other Christians, who were inclined to see biblical stories as allegorical. There were thus thinkers on both Buddhist and Christian sides at the time who tended to downplay the traditional cosmologies and miracle stories of their respective religions.

However, the Christian representative at the Panadura debate was Reverend David de Silva, a Sri Lankan student of the anti-Deist Christian missionary Daniel Gogerly (1792-1862). With the third edition of his anti-Buddhist work, the *Kristiyāni Pajñāpti* (1849, third edition 1861), Gogerly had finally triggered the Buddhists to respond to Christian attacks, goading them with the inclusion of an additional 77-page tract on "Proofs that Buddhism is not a true Religion." (Malalgoda 1976: 210). Gogerly's literalistic interpretation of the Bible, which rather than seeing miracles as allegorical took them as straightforward evidence of Christianity's superiority, set the Christian side up for defeat. 63 years later, Shin Ukkattha knew that a literalistic interpretation of Buddhist literature at the Kyaukkwin debate would do likewise. By taking a relativist approach to the Buddhist canon and its commentaries, Shin Ukkattha was able to deflect arguments attacking the types of stories of which people in the modern world were critical, and brought in logical argument and empirical evidence to critique traditional texts.

### *Walking out on the Sixth Council: how to insult the Sangha hierarchy*

Shin Ukkattha's attitudes to the texts, informed by his interest in scientific enquiry and influenced by attitudes in the emerging forms of global Buddhism generally, may have found confirmation not only in what he had learned of biblical criticism, but also in the type of textual editing taking place in India during his time there. One of the greatest editing projects of the world, lasting much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (main project 1919-1966), was the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, undertaken by a team of Sanskrit pundits in Pune. Taking into account over 1000 manuscripts, the Pune *Mahābhārata* has a critical apparatus which documents variant readings, including extensive passages not regarded as original. The frustrating of his expectations of a similar or perhaps even higher degree of criticality among Buddhists led a disappointed Shin Ukkattha to walk out on the most high-profile textual editing event in modern Theravada history: the Sixth Council. Held in Burma from 1954-1956, under the

premiership of U Nu, it commemorated the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha's departure from this life. It drew together the most learned monks from various Theravada regions, several of which were also celebrating their recent independence from colonial rule.

Not satisfied with walking out on the Sixth Council and insulting the monks who remained as being naïve in their failure to distinguish genuine Buddhist teachings from later Sinhalese fabrications, Shin Ukkatṭha wrote a 109-page refutation of a range of canonical and commentarial texts which he published in 1955, while the Council was still underway. This publication, the *Brahmayācanakathāpyassanā* ('The Question of the Request of Brahma'), was ostensibly in answer to a question posed by U Nu at the opening of the Sixth Council (Ukkatṭha 1955: 1-49). U Nu had enquired as to the veracity of the story that the Buddha had only taught the Dhamma once he had been persuaded to by the god Brahmā. Shin Ukkatṭha's response, that the story was a fabrication, reflected his rejection of traditional Buddhist cosmology. His reasoning was along the lines of the arguments of both theosophists and Buddhist modernists, such as Olcott, Anāgārika Dharmapāla, Wentz and Dawa-Sandup. For Shin Ukkatṭha, since there was no empirical evidence for the existence of heaven and hells, and since the omniscient Buddha would only have promulgated teachings in line with science, all the Pali canonical and commentarial textual passages that spoke of hells, heavens or gods were interpolations (Ukkatṭha 1955: 45). Ukkatṭha went so far as to say that the entire *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* was not the word of the Buddha, but a later addition to the canon: firstly, it was unmentioned in the account of the First Council held immediately after the Buddha's death; secondly, it was held to have been taught in heaven by the Buddha to the deity his mother had become – since heavens do not exist, this event could not have taken place (Ukkatṭha 1954: 4-6, 1963a: 54, 1963b: 7, 11, 99, 100, 155).

Now, in the Burmese understanding of the demise of the *sāsana* (the Buddhist religion), the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* will be the first part of the canon to disappear, and it contains the highest truth. Therefore leaders of the Buddhist revival such as Ledi Sayadaw advocated its protection and its promotion, not only amongst monks but throughout the general populace; the resulting emphasis on Abhidhamma shaped modern Burmese Buddhism (Kyaw 2014: 119). By leaving the Sixth Council and dismissing the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, both of which at the time were the focus of the efforts of leading Buddhist monks and lay people, Shin Ukkatṭha was setting himself against the monastic and political hierarchies, revealing the rift between his pro-secularist attitudes and the reactionary, antisecularist majority.

### *A Darwinian take on Buddhism: "Die Human, Born Human" and the Establishment's Response*

Just two years later, in 1957, Shin Ukkatṭha took this rejection of Buddhist cosmology further, writing a lengthy book that would become his most famous work, *Lutheluphyit* ('Die Human, Born Human'). It was published the following year (1958). This publication, which drew much on Darwinian evolutionary theory – the edition we have even includes pictures of an ape (1963b [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]: 218-242) – promulgated the idea that, since man is the highest stage of evolution it is impossible for a human to be reborn as anything lower than a human in evolutionary terms. Here we see Shin Ukkatṭha using the same arguments found in the earlier theosophically influenced works such as Olcott's *Catechism* and Wentz' *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, arguments current in the global Buddhist networks converging on India from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the absence of the heavens (and hells) of traditional cosmology, now disproven by empirical science, once one is born human one can only in future lives be reborn as human again. He thereby rejected the teaching – not only traditional, but canonical – that humans may be reborn into any of the five realms of existence: animals, humans, hungry ghosts, gods, and hell beings. Moreover, since traditional Buddhism teaches that human birth is traditionally regarded as a precious rarity only to be achieved through meritorious practice, Shin Ukkatṭha is implicitly rejected such merit-making practices. Shin Ukkatṭha compounds this critique with an argument that draws on the canonical teaching on rebirth, which states that it is our cravings that lead to rebirth. Since we cling to human existence, he argued, that craving (and not merit) will influence our rebirth to ensure that we become humans once more (Myat Saing 1964: 112-141).

This book incensed the Sangha hierarchy and, in 1959, under a new system of monastic courts set up under U Nu, Shin Ukkatṭha was, for the third time in his life, arrested and imprisoned. The charge was the promotion of *adhamma*, false Buddhist teachings or heresy. The court case dragged on until 1963, by which time General Ne Win had led a military coup which ousted the U Nu government (1962). Shin Ukkatṭha was included in Ne Win's amnesty of large numbers of prisoners. The Sangha hierarchy reacted by reverting to the most serious form of censure that had been available to them under the British, the *pakāsanīyakamma*, the procedure of formal denunciation, that which had previously been enacted against Ashin Ādiccabhivamsa (above). This *pakāsanīyakamma* procedure is found just once in the canon, deployed against the Buddha's bitter rival Devadatta, and – as far as we are aware – has only been reverted to by the Sangha in Burma. In the case of Shin Ukkatṭha, the new

military government, which in its early days was keen to see a separation between religion and government, provided no support for the enforcement of the *pakāsanīyakamma* and so the procedure was a failure. When, later in the decade, the military government made efforts to set up a body to oversee the Sangha, which could have enforced such an action, the government's plans were roundly rejected since they removed too much of the Sangha's autonomy at the same time.

### *Ukkaṭṭha as national hero: his rebuttal*

Shin Ukkaṭṭha, independent by nature, had all his life, up until this point, lived through a period of relative autonomy for monks. He was born twelve years after Britain completed its annexation of Burma in the third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, and the colonial government's policy of non-interference in religious affairs had brought a temporary halt to the centralised, relatively unified Sangha created by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Thudhamma Reform. Thus although Shin Ukkaṭṭha was staunchly anti-British – the British had confiscated all his family's wealth when his parents supplied military support for a rebellion led by Aung San's grandfather a few years before Shin Ukkaṭṭha's birth – his explorations and idiosyncratic views on Buddhism were made possible by the networks that developed under the British and allowed to flourish under British indifference to matters of religion, which by this time the British considered a matter of personal choice.

In 1966, approaching his seventieth birthday, Shin Ukkaṭṭha considered himself a stalwart of the independence movement, one who had lived his life in the service of Buddhism. He published a 147-page rebuttal of the *pakāsanīyakamma* against him, the *Tan-pyan-pakāsaniya*, in which he reaffirmed his “Die Human, Born Human” teaching. He railed against the stupidity of a Sangha hierarchy that could enact a *pakāsanīyakamma* not just against him but also against Shin Ādiccabhivaṃsa, breaking centuries of tradition whereby the *pakāsanīyakamma* – as any monk should know – was unique to Devadatta. Shin Ukkaṭṭha pointed out that the Sangha as a whole had initially reacted negatively, in 1901, to a work written by the national hero, Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923). The work in question is the *Paramatthadīpanīṭikā*, later known as *Ledi Ṭikā* or *Paramatthadīpanī Thin:gyo Mahāṭikā Thit*, ‘Great Subcommentary’. In it, Ledi Sayadaw pointed out 245 errors in the *Abhidhammattha Vibhāvanī Tikākyaw*, at that time the most popular commentary to the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, the most important book for the study of *Abhidhamma* in Burma. Due to his book, Ledi Sayadaw received a lot of criticism from the Sangha hierarchy. During the 35 years between its publication in 1901 and 1936, the year following the

*pakāsanīyakamma* against Shin Ādiccabhivaṃsa, approximately 40 books in Pali and Burmese appeared in response to the *Paramatthadīpanīṭikā* (Braun 2013: 44-62, Kyaw 2014: 116-117). Even though it was considered an outrage at the time, a *pakāsanīyakamma* was not enacted against Ledi Sayadaw (Ukkatṭha 1966, 74-75).

Ukkatṭha is making several points by bringing in the reaction to Ledi Sayadaw. The explicit point is that strong disagreement with the views of a fellow monk should lead to debate, not a *pakāsanīyakamma*, but the implicit points are about his personal status. Ledi Sayadaw was also a moderniser, scrutinising Buddhism in the context of newly emerging scientific worldviews in order to identify the genuine from later accretions. While initially the Sangha hierarchy had rejected Ledi Sayadaw's works, the correctness of his views were not only eventually accepted but – by the time Shin Ukkatṭha was writing – taken as the standard of Burmese orthodoxy. Shin Ukkatṭha expected his own teachings to be similarly appreciated. While this might seem like hubris with hindsight, we should remember that Shin Ukkatṭha had been a leading, national figure in the protection of Buddhism during the British period and that his teachings continued to gain a large following after Independence. His school had also been patronised by the likes of the 'father of the nation', Aung San, and Sir U Thwin, who would later be instrumental in transforming Mahāsi Sayadaw's Vipassanā tradition from a local to global movement.

### *The Politics of Sangha Control and the Posthumous Trial*

The relative autonomy of the Sangha under the early Ne Win government, similar to that under the British in terms of religious matters was not to last, because of political developments. After monks were involved in the U Thant riots of 1974 (Taylor 2015: 433-435), Ne Win again sought to establish a body to oversee the Sangha and make its members toe the government line. This time he was successful, with the establishment of the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee (SSC) in 1980 following the All Sangha Convention the same year. Those monastic organisations that failed to register ahead of this were not recognised as genuine monastic lineages and later the formation of new lineages was outlawed. Between 1981 and the present date (2016) the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee has set up 17 temporary 'State Special Vinicchaya Committees', each composed of five judges, tasked with investigating high-profile cases of *avinaya*, wrong monastic practice, and *adhamma*, false doctrine or heresy, amongst members of the Sangha. One of the more recent of these cases, and perhaps the most well-known internationally, was the 2005 trial of the Burmese *bhikkhunī* Saccavādī noted above. The second case to be heard,

and the one most famous in Burma, was that of Shin Ukkatṭha in 1981. Since Shin Ukkatṭha had died in 1978, he was represented by a handful of his followers.

The State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee takes as its criteria for correct *vinaya* and correct *dhamma* the canonical and commentarial texts reaffirmed by the Sixth Council, whose processes and conclusions Shin Ukkatṭha had so publicly rejected. Moreover, the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee does not accept any other forms of argument. Shin Ukkatṭha had been trained in the debating systems of India, whereby those who do not accept the same scripture must, to engage in debate, turn to other, mutually acceptable criteria, as seen in his successful drawing together of audiences from both sides in the Kyaukkwin debate of 1936. These shared criteria can include mutually acceptable textual authorities (such as scientific treatises and discourse), direct perception (including empirical enquiry), inference and analogy. Since Shin Ukkatṭha had rejected the criteria of the committee and the committee rejected the criteria of Shin Ukkatṭha, the outcome of the court case was predetermined. Indeed, in all 17 cases brought before the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee courts, the defendants have lost.

Since Shin Ukkatṭha had been a prolific writer, the accusers and judges were able to identify 21 separate counts of *adhamma* in his writings. The case allowed the five judges to express fully their canonical and commentarial learning on the subjects Shin Ukkatṭha had refuted, with the result that in the preface of its publication the document reporting their findings is referred to as *Theravada Swe Zon Kyan*: ('The Encyclopedia of Theravada') (Religious Affairs 2005: ga). The published volume occupies 1171 pages.

Those who had defended Shin Ukkatṭha's teachings in the trial – like the 'guilty' in other cases – had to sign admissions that the teachings were *adhamma* and had to undertake not to promulgate them. Not to comply is an imprisonable offence. As a result, Shin Ukkatṭha's once popular teachings have successfully been suppressed, and the antiseccular, reactionary nature of Burmese Buddhism reinforced. While he once had a widespread following, none now dare to express their conviction in his teachings in public. Nonetheless, there are some signs that his teachings still appeal. His publications, banned by the SSC, are secretly available in the street markets in Yangon. His rooms in the temple of Nat Hmi Tawya in Taungdwingyi where he spent the last years of his life, are preserved as a shrine in his honour. His daily schedule posted on the temple wall, where hang also several photos and a painting of him conversing with Ho Chi Minh. A statue of him has been erected in the courtyard. The current abbot of the temple is a pupil monk of Shin Ukkatṭha, who acted as defendant at the posthumous trial. In recent years, namely 2014 and 2015, in an atmosphere of some relaxation in government controls, the abbot

hosted a commemoration of Shin Ukkatṭha's 117<sup>th</sup> and 118<sup>th</sup> birthday at the temple. Famous monastic preachers, *dhammakathika*, and lay writers gave talks on dhamma and literature at these celebrations. So far there has been no reaction to these events from the SSC.

### ***Conclusion: the Dichotomy between Global and Reactionary Buddhist Modernism***

In his life and achievements, Shin Ukkatṭha exemplifies the convergences between the colonial, western and nationalist interpretations of Buddhism that contributed to the emergence of many of the features of global and reformed Buddhism that we find today. He took on board the critical standpoint towards texts, the relativism and the adaptations of Buddhist teaching in the light of modern worldviews that characterised the emerging discourse on the international Buddhist networks. Doing so enabled him to successfully defend Buddhism during the colonial period and to gather around him followers for whom this modernising teaching held great appeal. His revision of Burmese Buddhism was therefore crucial to his life and success, and – for him – crucial to the defence of Buddhism. This made it impossible for him to renege on such views, even if he had ever considered this option. His posthumous conviction for heresy in 1981 highlights the stark divergence between such discourse and the reactionary, antisecularist position of the Burmese Sangha hierarchy. His case highlights the divergent definitions of religion as an internal, individual choice or an external category (here the Buddhism of the SSC) that can be applied to all, regardless of whether they have elected to participate in it. Shin Ukkatṭha's life and posthumous conviction thus illustrate the further development of the divergences between definitions of religion whose appearance in the colonial period has been documented by Alicia Turner (2014: 133). Only such an antisecularist position could be used to control the Sangha, just as it had previously been used to curb the colonial authorities. A more relativist position would have allowed for divergent views, rather than seeking to impose centralised control. Since the antisecularist, reactionary stance among some members of the Sangha hierarchy served Ne Win's dictatorial, political ambitions, he provided it with the power of the state law enforcement apparati to ensure that dissenting voices were suppressed.

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